

The journey back to the States from Vietnam is a long one — 9,006 miles, as the

crow flies, from Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, to Washington—and 28 years after the last of America's military left the war-torn country, many veterans still struggle with the trip and their attempts to understand our nation's longest war.

Thousands of those veterans, their families and friends braved the blustery fall weather Nov. 6-11 for the 20th anniversary of the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, commonly called "the wall."

< Visitors thronged to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Nov. 6-11 during the 20th anniversary of its dedication.

Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Glenn Holloway



# VETERANS REUNITE, 'Remember, BROTHERS' at the WALL

> A pair of "Dingo" boots stand at the base of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The boots, like many other items, were left by visitors as tributes to fallen friends or relatives.

Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Glenn Holloway



For 65 hours, the staccato sound of volunteers reading names on the black granite memorial carried on the wind. The names are all that is left of the 58,229 sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters who died in Vietnam or later as a result of the wounds they received there. Those considered officially missing in action by the Department of Defense are also included in that number.

The memorial, dedicated in 1982, serves as a place for families, friends and fellow veterans to visit and pay

> The wall has special meaning for servicemembers like Chief Petty Officer Ken Willburn, who salutes the names of the men on the wall who served with his father-in-law in the 101st Airborne during the Vietnam War. Willburn is a hospital corpsman currently deployed to the Middle East with 2nd Force Service Support Group from Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Glenn Holloway





homage to those they miss so dearly.

At the wall and across the grounds, grown men and women—whose average age was 19 when they served, but are now mostly gray—stand in clumps and embrace. Some are silent, almost stoic, in demeanor. Some cry, their shoulders shake as overwhelming emotions wash over them. Some speak soothing words of comfort in other's ears. They remember.



sions save and take lives, and combat is a toss of the coin at times. You normally have the capability to control your destiny in civilian life, but combat controls you. I think when you lose a Marine you actually see yourself there. The loss of that man is tremendous to you because you see yourself possibly in that situation one day."

Navy corpsmen saw many Marines in "that situation," says Brian "Doc" Murray, a corpsman who also served with F Co., 2/1 from 1968 to 1969. For him the guilt is especially hard because in Vietnam he was responsible for the day-to-day care of the Marines with whom he served.

"Those we served with were more than friends. We all felt our duty

**< Dorothy Oxendine, national president of American Gold Star Mothers, Inc., speaks to a veteran at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Nov. 8.**

*Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Glenn Holloway*

### The Guilt of Coming Home

A common thread binding the lives of many of the veterans is their memories of the ones they "left behind." The emotion is especially difficult for Marines, says Tom "Stormy" Matteo, a two-tour veteran and the recipient of six Purple Heart awards. Marines have strong loyalties to their comrades and that drives their desire to leave no one on the field of battle.

"The guilt Marines feel is that (we) should not have left our fellow Marines," Matteo said. "I fought each day to stay alive and to help my friends stay alive. I did not engage in combat for any other reason."

Matteo's first tour in Vietnam was as a rifleman with 3rd Marine Division from 1965-66. He served with D Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment in the Da Nang area and with H Co., 2/4 at Chu Lai.

Following his first tour, Matteo served as a weapons instructor at Parris Island, S.C. There, although his service was important, he always longed to be back in country with his brothers he left behind, he said.

When he returned to Vietnam in 1968, Matteo became a platoon leader with F Co., 2/1, 1st MarDiv. There, his feelings of loyalty and responsibility became even more intense. "Your deci-

strongly," said Murray. "Marines were close to a limited number of comrades (in their squads) but we were responsible for a complete platoon. For this reason we 'left' a larger number behind when we rotated out."

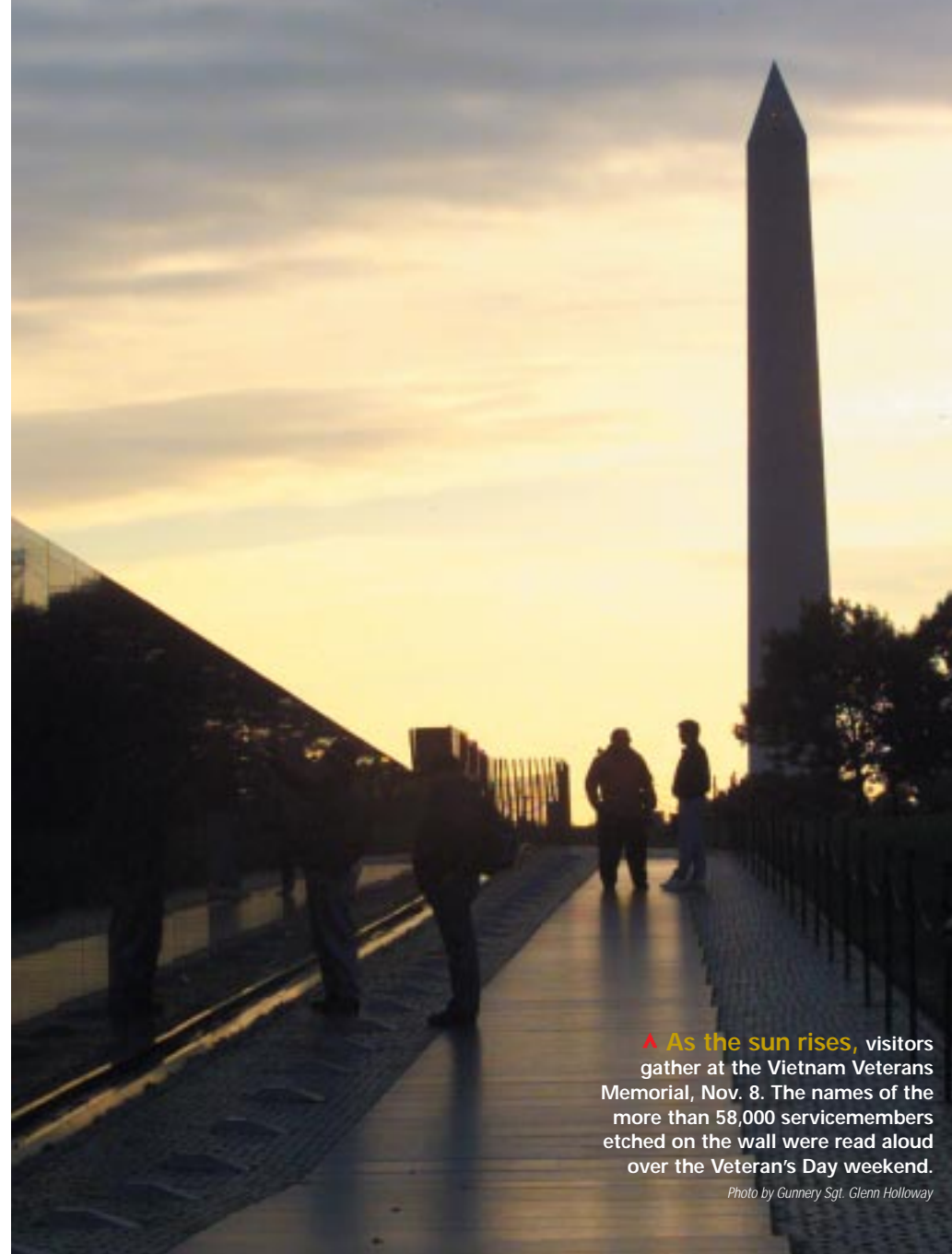
### The Healing Affects of Stone

A cold November wind chills the throngs of people who meander along the footpath of the memorial. Brightly colored autumn leaves mix with the mementos visitors place beside the stark, black granite wall. Platoon photographs, American flags and medals of valor lie in harsh contrast beside cans of Schlitz beer and dime bags of marijuana. Each tribute is significant to someone—a reminder of a friend or loved one lost on the battlefields of Southeast Asia.

A large group of 2/1 Marines are at the wall for their reunion. Many of their brothers still cannot visit the memorial, their emotional wounds still too fresh to be uncovered.

"Stormy" Matteo understands. It was in 1996, nearly 27 years after he left Vietnam, and 14 years after its dedication, that he finally visited the wall for the first time. He made the trip alone.

"I walked the wall and had no emotion or desire to touch it or look up at my friends' names," he said. "I just left



**▲ As the sun rises, visitors gather at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Nov. 8. The names of the more than 58,000 servicemembers etched on the wall were read aloud over the Veteran's Day weekend.**

*Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Glenn Holloway*

a picture there with a poem and walked away from it."

Yet the wall holds an attraction for the veterans who feel ready to face their memories, and many return again and again to do just that.

"When I returned in 1998 and went to the wall with some great 2/1 friends, we all broke down and displayed emotion," said Matteo. "It was really hard, because when you see one of your brothers cry, you start crying for his pain. That was an experience I'll always remember."

Steve Brothers, a pipe fitter from Merrimack, N.H., and a 2/1 veteran from 1969 to 1970, also knows about the healing abilities of the wall, he said. His first trip to the memorial in 1993

was much like any other veteran's in that he had subconsciously suppressed memories of his experiences in Vietnam until then.

"I didn't feel (survivor's guilt) returning home (from Vietnam), because at the time I was unable to comprehend the magnitude of what really happened," said Brothers, who was with Weapons Plt., H Co., 2/1.

When he did finally visit the wall, the memories came flooding back, he said. He remembers questioning his ability to handle the sudden flashbacks of all the people he knew who had died there and all the people he had personally witnessed being killed there.

"My first trip to the wall was really hard, but each time I visit, it helps

bring a little more closure," he said. "Although the wall may help me heal, I still (have) to relive certain parts of Vietnam that to this day are still there in my mind."

### The Families' of the Fallen

As hard as the memories of Vietnam are for the survivors of the war, the families of those who died there must also bear heavy burdens, said Dorothy Oxendine, national president of American Gold Star Mothers, Inc. The wall serves as a conduit for Oxendine and others, allowing them to connect with the men and women immortalized there.

"It's almost alive," she said. "You can feel something by coming here whether you know someone or not."

Oxendine's son Willie "Frenchy" Oxendine III was killed May 30, 1968,

**> Tom "Stormy" Matteo reads the plaque dedicated to Capt. Troy Robert Oliver Jr., to Oliver's daughter Traci Oliver-Kilgariff and the assembled veterans of 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Nov. 8.**

*Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Glenn Holloway*

in the Quang Tri Province of Vietnam. He was with I Co. 3/26. He had been in the Corps less than a year when he was killed.

"Going to the wall for the first time and seeing all those names made me finally accept the fact that (her son) was dead," she said. "I felt like they were all together—friends and brothers—for eternity. Then and now I feel a great sense of peace and comfort engulf me when I go to the wall, touch a name, say a prayer, hug a person or shed a tear.

"Right now with all my heart, I wish I could hold my son and say 'welcome home,'" she said. "Instead he's waiting for us to welcome us (home) and someday we'll all be together again."

Traci Oliver-Kilgariff was 2 in 1968 when her father Capt. Troy R. Oliver Jr. was killed near Khe Sahn. He was among the Marines killed when a North Vietnamese Army battalion attacked F Co., 2/1 while the company was sweeping mines from the road on Route 9. Out of the 150 Marines in the company, 33 died that day and 67 others were wounded.

Though her only memories of her father are from pictures and stories she heard growing up, she says her first visit to the memorial with her stepfather in 1983 as a high school junior, and several subsequent visits help her cope with the void left by her father's absence in her life.

It wasn't until the 10th anniversary of the wall's dedication, however, that Oliver-Kilgariff really understood, she



said. "It was rainy, horrible weather and I was by the wall ... I connected and understood that I wasn't alone.

She is still overwhelmed by the power of the wall each time she visits, she said.

"It's the same every time I go," she said. Though she knows where her father's name is, each time she sees it, she says, "Ah! There it is." It takes me aback ... makes me heavy in the heart."

She is not alone with her feelings. Oliver-Kilgariff met some of those who share a similar burden at a 2/1 reunion Nov. 8 at the wall. She and family members of other 2/1 KIAs were presented plaques in honor of the Marines they lost in Vietnam.

The camaraderie between the 2/1 veterans is great to see, Oliver-Kilgariff said. "It's touching and comforting to know they have the brotherhood they have." **M**

**For more information on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, visit [www.vvmf.org](http://www.vvmf.org). For more information on Vietnam Veterans of 2nd BN, 1st Reg., 1st MarDiv, Inc., visit [www.cris.com/~ogre1538/index.htm](http://www.cris.com/~ogre1538/index.htm).**